

The Maniac

By Maurice Level
Illustrated by Harry Townsend



When a man's life hangs on keeping his nerve.

HE WAS neither malicious nor bloodthirsty. It was only that he had conceived a very special idea of the pleasures of existence. Perhaps it was that, having tried them all, he no longer found the thrill of the unexpected in any of them.

He went to the theater, not to follow the piece, or to look through his opera-glasses at the spectators, but because he hoped that some day a fire might break out. At the fair of Neuilly he visited the various menageries in anticipation of a catastrophe: the tamer attacked by the beasts. He had tried bull-fights, but soon tired of them; the slaughter appeared too well-regulated, too natural, and it disgusted him to watch suffering.

What he was always looking for was the quick and keen anguish caused by some unexpected disaster, some new kind of accident; so much so that, having been at the Opéra Comique on the night of the great fire, from which he escaped unhurt; that having been a couple of steps from the cage the day the celebrated Fred was devoured by his lions, he lost almost all interest in theaters and menageries. To those who were astonished at this apparent change in his tastes, he replied:

"But there's nothing more to see there. They don't give me the slightest sensation. All that I care for is the effect produced on others and on me."

When he was deprived of these two favorite pleasures—it had taken him ten years to get what he wanted from them—he fell into a state of mental and physical depression, and for some months rarely left his house.

THEN came a morning when the walls of Paris were covered with multi-colored posters that showed, on an azure background, a curious inclined track which came down, wound round, and fell like a ribbon. Up

at the top, tiny as a dot, a cyclist seemed to be waiting for a signal to rush down the giddy descent. At the same time the newspapers gave accounts of an extraordinary feat that explained the meaning of this weird picture.

It seemed that the cyclist dashed down the narrow path at full speed, went up round the loop, then down to the bottom. For a second during this fantastic performance he was head downward, his feet up in the air.

The acrobat invited the press to come and examine the track and the machine so that they might see there was no trickery about it, and he explained that his ability to perform the feat was due to calculations of extreme precision, and that, so long as he kept his nerve, nothing could prevent its accomplishment.

Now it is certain that when the life of a man hangs on keeping his nerve, it hangs on a very insecure peg!

Since the appearance of the advertisement, our maniac had recovered some of his good humor.

He went to the private demonstration, and becoming convinced that a new sensation awaited him, was in a seat on the first night to watch closely this looping the loop.

He had taken a box that faced the end of the track, and he sat there alone, not wishing to have near him anyone who might distract his close attention.

The whole thing was over in a few minutes. He had just time to see the black speck appear on the whiteness of the track, a formidable spurt, a plunge, a gigantic bound, and that was all. It gave him a thrill, swift and vivid as lightning.

BUT as he went out with the crowd he reflected that though he might feel this sensation twice or thrice, it must eventually pall, as all the others had done. He had not found what he was looking for. Then came the thought that a man's nerve has limitations, that the strength of a bicycle is, after all, only relative, and that there is no track of the kind, however secure it may seem, that may not some time give way. And he arrived at the conclusion that it was inevitable that some day an accident must occur.

From this to deciding to watch for that accident was a very small step.

"I will go to see this looping of the loop every night," he decided. "I will go till I see that man break his head. If it doesn't happen during this three months in Paris I will follow him elsewhere till it does."

For two months, every evening at the same time, he went to the same box and sat in the same seat. The management had grown to know him. He had

taken the box for the whole period of the turn, and they wondered vainly what could account for this costly whim.

ONE evening, when the acrobat had gone through his performance earlier than usual, he saw him in a corridor and went up to him. There was no need for an introduction.

"I know you already," said the bicyclist. "You are always at the hall. You come every night."

Surprised, he said: "It is true I am deeply interested in your performance . . . But who has told you so?"

The man smiled: "No one. I see you."

"That is very surprising. At such a height . . . at such a moment . . . your mind is sufficiently free to pick out the spectators down below?"

"Certainly not. I don't see the spectators down below. It would be extremely dangerous for me to pay any attention to a crowd that moves and chatters. In all matters connected with my profession, in addition to the turn itself, it's theory and practice; there is something else, a kind of trick . . ."

He started, "A trick?"

"Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean trickery. I mean something of which the public has no suspicion, something that is perhaps the most delicate part of the whole performance. Shall I explain?"

Well, I accept it as a fact that it is not possible to empty the brain till it contains but one idea, impossible to keep the mind fixed on any one thought. As complete concentration is necessary, I choose in the hall some one object on which I fix my eyes. I see nothing but that object. From the second I have my gaze on it, nothing else exists. I get on the saddle. My hands gripping the bars, I think of nothing; neither of my balance, nor my direction. I am sure of my muscles; they are as firm as steel. There is

only one part of me I am afraid of: my eyes. But once I have fixed them on something, I am sure of them as well. (Continued on page 62)



"I will go till I see that man break his head if it takes three months."

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None But Americans!

(Concluded from page 21)

physical possession—except for this and his impetuous, pathetic marriage; the elder J. P. was in his middle thirties; a reticent, seemingly unambitious banker, actually asked by one corporation to make place for a more enterprising man "who will not merely vote but will express an idea or a suggestion."

The humiliation of this forced resignation seemingly quickens something in him. At least, he unbosoms sufficiently to become a friend and partner of Charles H. Coster, a man with railway schemes.

NOW the Vanderbilts had been bullied into buying the "Nickel Plate" an incomplete competing line from Chicago to Buffalo, an institution brazenly plotted by a Chicagoan and executed by a New Yorker. The result had been so prompt and easy that it encouraged a supplemental strategem by a different operator who constructed the West Shore road. This fell into a receivership, but not before it had brought the New York Central to the verge of bankruptcy and the Vanderbilts into a panic. Here Morgan appeared as advisor. A majority of West Shore stock was bought at an eye-opening high price and bonds which startled the investment world in point of longevity—a 400 years maturity—were issued.

By now there had engendered in the Morgan mind the idea that competition was unprofitable and wasteful. His partner, Coster, had been bemoaning the ruinous barbarism of rate cutting by the railways. They devised the plan of pooling freight traffic; classifying it, routing it, and above all settling on prices and rates. The Vanderbilt routes were won over with a word. The next and most difficult group were the Coal Lines.

A meeting of the presidents was tactfully arranged by Anthony J. Drexel—Morgan's senior partner. At this meeting Morgan presided. His address as presiding officer, laconic, blunt, revealed already the beginning of that imperiousness which developed a quarter of a century later into super-megalomania.

"The purpose of this meeting," he stated, "is to cause the members of this railroad association no longer to take the law into their own hands when they suspect they have been wronged, as has been too much the practice heretofore. This is not customary elsewhere in civilized communities and no good reason exists why such a practice should continue among railroads."

THE harsh phrasing and dictatorial manner stung the sensitive and semi-invalidated president of the Pennsylvania Railway. Mr. Roberts rose resentfully and answered. "Speaking in behalf of the railroad people of this country I object to this very strong language which indicates that we, the railroad people, are a set of anarchists and this is an attempt to substitute law and arbitration for anarchy and might. As a matter of fact, all our troubles come from building paralleling roads."

Morgan was nonplussed for a few moments. He was, however, willing to be conciliatory because Roberts, with his "all our troubles come from building parallel roads" had quite unwittingly struck a strongly responsive

(To be continued in Hearst's for April)

The Maniac

(Concluded from page 12)

Now, the first night I performed here, it happened that my eyes fell on your box. I saw you. I saw nothing but you. Without knowing it, you caught and held my eyes. . . . You became the point, the object of which I have told you. The second day I looked for you at the same place. The following days it was the same. And so it happens that now, as soon as I appear, by instinct my eyes turn to you. You help me; you are the precious aid indispensable to my performance. Now do you understand why I know you?"

NEXT day the maniac was in his usual sent. In the hall there were the usual movements and murmurs of keen anticipation. Suddenly a dense silence fell: that profound silence when you feel that an audience is holding its breath. The acrobat was on his machine which was held by two men,

cost. Therefore Mr. Roberts was conciliated during an adjournment; and the final hard-and-fast scheme to maintain the price of transportation service and to work in secret harmony became effective in a short time.

But even so, it came too late for about 37 percent of the country's railway mileage. Many roads were running towards bankruptcy. Here was Coster's opportunity and Morgan's eager aid in its exploitation. The Philadelphia and Reading, bankrupt, became Morgan's first really important patient. In these reorganizations another financial innovation was instituted; that of making the shareholders bear 50 percent of the burden. Morgan accepted literally the word "mortgage"—mort-gage, or pledge unto death. Along with his growing faith in monopoly came a belief in the inalienable privilege and unrelaxable grip of the bondholders, particularly the holder of the prior lien. Heretofore bondholders everywhere had been mutually helpful and sympathetic with stockholders of an insolvent corporation. But the Morgan idea was to keep the first mortgage bonds inviolate and to treat junior liens gently whenever and wherever possible and to assess stockholders—common and preferred—heavily. If it were necessary for bondholders to yield something they were recompensed by a liberal allowance of stock. A soothing phrase was a part of the invention: "a minimum of fixed liability against a maximum of contingent liability." This rule Morgan himself deliberately violated when he converted \$500,000,000 of United States Steel corporation preferred stock into general mortgage bonds, of which more anon.

FRANKLIN B. GOWEN, president of the Reading, had his own plan to restore his road, it was far less expensive than Morgan's and far easier on the stockholders. But Anthony Drexel's junior partner prevailed, and no sooner was the road reorganized than Gowen was deposed in favor of Austin Corbin, whose only outstanding virtue seems to have been the ability to see his own inability to manage the Reading, and his choice of A. A. McLeod to do it for him.

This self-educated Scotch-American, who had worked his way from the lowest rung of railroading to the point where he actually succeeded Corbin at Corbin's own request, was no sooner in actual authority than he decided to obtain what the Reading needed most—direct access to New England. A Boston terminal, broader market for coal, cheap coal for New England factories, a greater sphere for the Reading—Drexel was enthusiastic. None save Morgan opposed it.

AS soon as young McLeod obtained the New York and New England line he became aware of covert but drastic hostility. One day Mr. Morgan told his senior partner, Drexel, that McLeod had invaded "my territory" and must go. With tears in his eyes—a witness testified subsequently—the older man pleaded. The deadlock was submitted to the highest Reading interests. Being Philadelphians, touchy about New York dictation, and themselves believing in McLeod's plans, they refused to oust him.

waiting for the signal to set off. He was balanced to perfection, his hands grasping the bar, his head up, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

He cried "Hop!" and the men pushed him off.

Just at that moment, in the most natural way possible, the maniac rose, pushed back his seat, and went to one at the other side of the box. Then a terrible thing happened. The cyclist was thrown violently up in the air. His machine rushed forward, flew up, and lurching out into the midst of the shrieks of terror that filled the hall, fell in the crowd.

With a methodical gesture the maniac put on his overcoat, smoothed his hat on the cuff of his sleeve, and went out.

DE Mausepout might have written "The Beggar," but even he could not have invented upon it. Watch for this brilliant Maurice Level story—in Hearst's for April.

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